

People and New Technology: Stopping Them from Going Mental

David Chaudron, PhD

Why is that whenever we get a new version of Powerpoint we get a little excited (or at least curious), but when we implement your favorite blend of enterprise, CRM or E-HR software, the best we can do is cringe?

Think back too, if you are old enough, to the first fax machine installed in the office. Did it cause yelling and screaming? Make you work hours no sane person would tolerate? Make you seriously wonder why you went into your profession?

Think about the reasons why:

- The existing infrastructure worked pretty well. This technology just makes something I usually do more convenient or faster.
- The basics of my job stay the same. I can learn a few tricks in the new version.
- I don't have to re-arrange my entire workflow because of a new bell or whistle.
- I create slide shows to make me look good by delivering what is needed in a faster or more entertaining way.
- I won't lose my job if I choose the wrong-color slide.
- I still have my job and I still get paid.

On the other hand, enterprise software, compared to Powerpoint, is a root-shattering experience compared to branches blowing in the wind. What makes it worse is the we-do-everything software has to be customized, and also made to work with all the other we-do-everything software you bought.

If technical challenges aren't enough, enterprise software messes with employees' "mental model". A mental model is our understanding of how the work-world works, our place in it, and what we have to do to 1) do our job; 2) get recognized; and 3) avoid major screw-ups. If we don't have a clear mental model, we often catastrophize – imagining the worst possible things could happen. For some reason, people are reluctant to use a system that could blow up in their face. This reluctance makes them uncertain, crotchety, and feel continually behind the power curve.

What to do:

Unfortunately, it means going beyond developing test databases, improving business process integrity, reviewing quality assurance reports and running the old and new systems in parallel:

Realize that the change will fundamentally affect their work lives and perhaps their livelihood. As information and who influences gets changed, old alliances, and friendships do as well. Not only is the IT system affected, but also the politics of doing business. Substantive teambuilding may be required to cement these new relationships.

Assess the company culture and how it has dealt with change in the past. This may give you vital clues to company “hotspots” of problems, and help you focus where you need to bring resources to bear.

Tell employees what new measures will be used to judge them, and what it will take to make those measures move in the right direction. These new measures may be at the corporate level for some and at a department or individual level for others.

Train more than your non-existent budget will allow. Go beyond hours-long Powerpoint slides and assist them in practicing on test databases well enough to significantly reduce the chance of errors. Mentoring from superusers will also help in this regard, as well as extensive, context specific help on specific workflows and inputs.

Modify organizational structure, personnel appraisal, and if necessary, career ladders and job descriptions to accommodate the new system. One of the worse things that can happen would be to reward the old behaviors when the new system is in place, or those who need authority don't have it.